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2002HOCHI00695 - UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED PTQ9877

PAGE 01 HO CHI 00695 01 OF 02 150601Z  
ACTION DRL-02

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AID-00	AMAD-00	CIAE-00	DODE-00	SRPP-00
	EAP-00	EB-00	UTED-00	H-01	TEDE-00	INR-00	IO-00
	L-00	MOFM-05	MOF-01	NSAE-00	NSCE-00	OIC-02	OPIC-01
	PRS-00	P-00	SP-00	SS-00	STR-00	TEST-00	TRSE-00
	USIE-00	PRM-00	G-00	NFAT-00	SAS-00	/012W	
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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6509  
INFO AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY  
USMISSION GENEVA

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000695

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV AND EAP/PD/KFOSTER  
DEPARTMENT ALSO FOR DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM KIRF VM HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: HOA HAO RELIGION THRIVING AGAIN IN VIETNAM

1. SUMMARY: FOLLOWERS OF VIETNAM'S HOA HAO RELIGION HAVE ENJOYED CONSIDERABLE FREEDOM TO WORSHIP SINCE THE GVN GRANTED OFFICIAL RECOGNITION IN 1999 TO THIS PREVIOUSLY OUTLAWED BUDDHIST SECT. DURING A JUNE 23-25 VISIT TO AN GIANG PROVINCE IN THE MEKONG DELTA, POLOFF VISITED A SPARKLING NEW HOA HAO BUDDHIST PAGODA AND

UNCLASSIFIED

PAGE 02 HO CHI 00695 01 OF 02 150601Z  
SPOKE WITH SEVERAL OPTIMISTIC FOLLOWERS OF THE RELIGION AT PHU MY (HOA HAO) VILLAGE. ON JUNE 28, MORE THAN 200,000 HOA HAO DEVOTEES JOURNEYED TO PHU MY TO ATTEND AN ANNUAL RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL. STILL, SOME BELIEVERS REMAIN DISSATISFIED WITH THE GVN'S HANDLING OF HOA HAO AFFAIRS, AND THE GVN REMAINS WARY OF HOA HAO MONKS IT CONSIDERS "DISSIDENT." SEPTEL WILL REPORT ON A HOA HAO MONK RECENTLY RELEASED FROM PRISON AND ON POLICE PREVENTING POLOFF FROM MEETING WITH ANOTHER DISSIDENT MONK. END SUMMARY.

FREEDOM TO WORSHIP

2. THE HOA HAO WERE AMONG THE LAST RESISTANCE TO COMMUNIST FORCES IN THE MEKONG DELTA IN 1975. THEIR ANTI-COMMUNIST HISTORY STEMS FROM THE VIET MINH'S EXECUTION OF THEIR FOUNDER, HUYNH PHU SO, IN 1947. IN SUMMER 1975, THE GOVERNMENT DISBANDED THE HOA HAO, CONFISCATED THEIR PROPERTIES, AND OUTLAWED THEIR PRACTICES. BECAUSE ITS BASIC TENETS EMPHASIZE INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY PRAYER AT HOME RATHER THAN PUBLIC WORSHIP AT PAGODAS, THE RELIGION SURVIVED.

3. IN 1999, THE GVN ORGANIZED A HOA HAO CONGRESS THAT SELECTED OFFICERS FOR A NEW GOVERNMENT-SANCTIONED HOA HAO REPRESENTATIVE COMMITTEE. THIS LED TO OFFICIAL GVN RECOGNITION LATER IN THE YEAR. MANY HOA HAO FOLLOWERS ALLEGE THAT THE REPRESENTATIVE COMMITTEE IS ANYTHING BUT REPRESENTATIVE -- THE 11 OFFICERS ELECTED AT THE CONGRESS WERE THE SAME 11 PERSONS THE GVN HAD SELECTED

UNCLASSIFIED

PAGE 03 HO CHI 00695 01 OF 02 150601Z  
TO ORGANIZE THE CONGRESS.

4. SINCE RECOGNITION IN 1999, THE GVN HAS RELAXED SIGNIFICANTLY ITS EARLIER RESTRICTIONS ON HOA HAO PRACTICE. MOST IMPORTANTLY, HOA HAO BELIEVERS MAY NOW WORSHIP FREELY IN THEIR HOMES AND PUBLICLY AT RECOGNIZED PAGODAS. THE GVN NO LONGER FORBIDS DISPLAY OF THE FOUNDER'S PHOTOGRAPH, ALTHOUGH IT STILL PROHIBITS DISPLAY OF THE HOA HAO FLAG. THE OFFICIAL REPRESENTATIVE COMMITTEE HAS PUBLISHED SOME, BUT NOT ALL, OF THE HOA HAO SACRED LITERATURE. PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS HAVE RETURNED A FEW PREVIOUSLY CONFISCATED PAGODAS, BUT CONTINUE TO HOLD AND USE FOR OTHER PURPOSES MOST HOA HAO PROPERTIES THAT HAD BEEN CONFISCATED AFTER 1975.

NEW HOA HAO PAGODA

15. ON JUNE 24, POLOFF MADE AN UNSCHEDULED STOP AT SPARKLING NEW PHU THO ONG BA HOA HAO PAGODA IN CHO MOI DISTRICT IN AN GIANG PROVINCE. THE PAGODA MANAGER, MR. NGUYEN VAN THOI, SAID FLOODING TWO YEARS EARLIER HAD SEVERELY DAMAGED AN OLDER PAGODA BY THE SAME NAME, LOCATED NEARBY. HE AND OTHER HOA HAO FOLLOWERS REQUESTED AND RECEIVED PERMISSION FROM THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE OFFICIAL HOA HAO REPRESENTATIVE COMMITTEE TO BUILD A NEW PAGODA. MR. THOI CONFIRMED THAT PHU THO ONG BA WAS THE FIRST NEW HOA HAO PAGODA TO BE BUILT SINCE BEFORE 1975; CONSTRUCTION WAS COMPLETED IN MAY 2002.

UNCLASSIFIED

PAGE 04 HO CHI 00695 01 OF 02 150601Z

16. MR. THOI, HIS DEPUTY, THE SENIOR MONK, THREE OTHER MONKS, AND APPROXIMATELY 30 ORDINARY HOA HAO BELIEVERS WERE PRESENT AT THE PAGODA WHEN POLOFF VISITED. ALTHOUGH THE MONKS AND BELIEVERS APPEARED PLEASED BY POLOFF'S UNANNOUNCED VISIT, MR. THOI SEEMED A BIT DISCONCERTED. STILL HE INVITED POLOFF TO STAY FOR LUNCH. DURING THE MEAL, MR. THOI, HIS DEPUTY, AND A FEMALE FOLLOWER WHO MAY HAVE BEEN A HOA HAO NUN SAID THAT RECOGNITION OF THE HOA HAO IN 1999 HAD MADE LIFE EASIER. THEY WOULD NOT BE DRAWN OUT ON SPECIFIC ISSUES WHERE THEY HAD SEEN IMPROVEMENT, HOWEVER.

17. MR. THOI SAID THAT SINCE 1999, HOA HAO COMMITTEES HAVE BEEN ESTABLISHED AT PROVINCIAL, DISTRICT, AND COMMUNE LEVELS IN AREAS WHERE HOA HAO BELIEVERS ARE POPULOUS. HE AVOIDED POLOFF'S QUESTIONS ON WHETHER THESE COMMITTEES WERE ELECTED OR APPOINTED.

18. THE SENIOR MONK TOOK POLOFF ON A TOUR OF THE PAGODA, WHICH CONTAINED SEVERAL BUDDHIST SHRINES SET UP IN TWO SPACIOUS ROOMS. WORSHIPPERS PRAYED AND BURNED INCENSE AT THE SHRINES, WHICH DISPLAYED EITHER RED WOODEN

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED PTQ9878

PAGE 01 HO CHI 00695 02 OF 02 150602Z  
ACTION DRL-02

INFO	LOG-00	AID-00	AMAD-00	CIAE-00	DODE-00	SRPP-00	EAP-00
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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6510  
INFO AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY  
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BLOCKS TO SYMBOLIZE THE BUDDHA OR SMALL FIGURES OF BODHISATTVAS. THE CENTRAL FIGURE AT ONE OF THE MORE PROMINENT SHRINES WAS A BUST OF HO CHI MINH. IT APPEARED THAT WORSHIPPERS PRAYED AND BURNED INCENSE IN FRONT OF THIS STATUE IN THE SAME WAY THEY DID AT THE OTHER SHRINES. (NOTE: VIETNAMESE RELIGIOUS PRACTICE  
UNCLASSIFIED

PAGE 02 HO CHI 00695 02 OF 02 150602Z  
INCLUDES VENERATION OF HISTORICAL PERSONALITIES. THERE ARE SMALL STATUES/PORTRAITS OF HO CHI MINH IN OTHER GOVERNMENT-REGULATED PAGODAS. VENERATION OF HISTORICAL FIGURES, HOWEVER, USUALLY IS PERFORMED IN A PAGODA-LIKE STRUCTURE CALLED A "DEN." FOR HISTORICAL REASONS, THE BUST OF HO CHI MINH INSIDE A HOA HAO PAGODA SEEMED INCONGRUOUS. END NOTE.)

VISIT TO PHU MY (HOA HAO) VILLAGE  
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19. ALSO ON JUNE 24, POLOFF VISITED AN HOA (THE MAIN HOA HAO PAGODA) AND TO DINH (THE HOA HAO FOUNDER'S ANCESTRAL HOME), BOTH PILGRIMAGE SITES IN PHU MY (HOA HAO) VILLAGE. THE OFFICIAL HOA HAO REPRESENTATIVE COMMITTEE, WHOSE OFFICES ARE LOCATED AT AN HOA PAGODA, PREVIOUSLY HAD DECLINED TO MEET WITH POLOFF. THEY EXPLAINED THEY WERE TOO BUSY WITH PREPARATIONS FOR THE ANNUAL FOUNDING DAY FESTIVAL - FALLING ON JUNE 28.

110. PREPARATIONS FOR THE FESTIVAL INDEED WERE IN FULL

SWING. POLOFF SAW SCORES OF PEOPLE BUSY PACKAGING FOODS AND CONSTRUCTING SHELTERS FOR THE TENS OF THOUSANDS OF HOA HAO FOLLOWERS EXPECTED TO DESCEND ON THE VILLAGE FOUR DAYS LATER. HUNDREDS OF HOA HAO FOLLOWERS ALREADY WERE VISITING AND WORSHIPPING AT THE TWO PILGRIMAGE SITES. (NOTE: ON A REGULAR DAY, BETWEEN 100 AND 200 FOLLOWERS VISIT AN HOA PAGODA.)

11. POLOFF SPOKE TO SEVERAL OF THE ORDINARY HOA HAO FOLLOWERS HE ENCOUNTERED. THEY ALL EXPRESSED  
UNCLASSIFIED

PAGE 03 HO CHI 00695 02 OF 02 150602Z  
APPRECIATION THAT THEY NOW COULD COME TO THE PAGODA TO WORSHIP FREELY AND PUBLICLY. ONE FOLLOWER NOTED THAT NEIGHBORING PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS HAD DISTRIBUTED A CIRCULAR INFORMING HOA HAO BELIEVERS THAT THIS YEAR THEY WOULD BE ALLOWED TO HOLD PUBLIC CEREMONIES TO COMMEMORATE FOUNDING DAY IN THEIR OWN LOCALITIES. (NOTE: THE GVN HAD PROHIBITED PUBLIC COMMEMORATION OF FOUNDING DAY BEFORE 1999, AND FROM 1999 UNTIL THIS YEAR HAD RESTRICTED IT TO PHU MY VILLAGE.)

12. AFTER FOUNDING DAY, POLOFF SPOKE TO SEVERAL HOA HAO CONTACTS WHO TOLD HIM THAT BETWEEN 200,000 AND 250,000 PERSONS HAD MADE THE PILGRIMAGE TO PHU MY. THEY PRAYED AT THE PAGODA, BURNED INCENSE AT THE ANCESTRAL HOME, LISTENED TO SPEECHES, AND PICNICKED IN A FESTIVE ATMOSPHERE, ACCORDING TO THESE CONTACTS. MOST OF THE ATTENDEES WERE FROM THE MEKONG DELTA -- ABLE TO MAKE THE JOURNEY AND RETURN HOME THE SAME DAY. MANY PEOPLE, HOWEVER, STAYED OVERNIGHT OR FOR SEVERAL NIGHTS WITH FRIENDS, RELATIVES, OR AT HOTELS. POLOFF, WHO HAD ATTENDED THE 1999 FOUNDING DAY FESTIVAL AND HAS VISITED PHU MY VILLAGE THREE TIMES SINCE, NOTICED SEVERAL HOTELS, SHOPS, AND OTHER SIGNS OF A TOURIST INDUSTRY THAT WERE NOT APPARENT THREE YEARS EARLIER.

COMMENT

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13. RECOGNITION OF THE HOA HAO IN 1999 HAS LED TO SIGNIFICANT FREEDOM OF WORSHIP FOR ORDINARY HOA HAO FOLLOWERS. SOME BELIEVERS, HOWEVER, CONTINUE TO CRITICIZE THE NON-DEMOCRATIC MANNER IN WHICH THE GVN  
UNCLASSIFIED

PAGE 04 HO CHI 00695 02 OF 02 150602Z  
ESTABLISHED THE OFFICIAL REPRESENTATIVE COMMITTEE. LEADERS OF THE PRE-1975 HOA HAO CHURCH ARE STILL ANGRY AT BEING EXCLUDED FROM PARTICIPATING IN ADMINISTERING HOA HAO AFFAIRS. LOCAL AUTHORITIES, MOREOVER, CONTINUE TO CLOSELY MONITOR AND SOMETIMES HARASS MONKS OR OTHER BELIEVERS WHO ORGANIZE WORSHIP ACTIVITIES INDEPENDENT OF THE OFFICIAL REPRESENTATIVE COMMITTEE.

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